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Here is the Good News of the United Church of Christ, especially edited for local congregations and designed to keep members in touch with the wider church. Each story is short and complete and can stand alone, ready to drop into the weekly bulletin or the monthly newsletter. The code at the end of some entries refers interested readers to a more comprehensive story in *United Church News*.

## THE 19TH CENTURY ROSA

**PARKS** – Did you know that 100 years before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white woman on a Montgomery, Ala., bus, there was another famous public transit confrontation in New York City? Author Clara Merritt DeBoer in her book, *Be Jubilant my Feet*, (Garland Publishing, New York, 1994) tells the story of Elizabeth Jennings who, in 1854, was ejected from a street railway while going to her job as an organist at a Congregational church. In a suit pleaded by (later U.S. President) Chester A. Arthur before the State Supreme Court, she succeeded in desegregating five New York City railroad lines. The following year, a black Congregational minister, James Pennington, successfully challenged the last company. Both cases were helped by the American Missionary Association, an abolitionist movement founded mostly by Congregationalists in 1846. Today, the AMA is a unit of the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries and still toils to empower people and institutions at risk, including inner city residents, the poor, the homeless, those with AIDS, those with no health care and public schools.

**(DON'T) "GIVE ME YOUR TIRED, YOUR POOR"** – The millions of immigrants who flowed into New York harbor in the late 19th and early 20th centuries seeking the promised land inspired poet Emma Lazarus to pen the lines, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." She'd have to do a rewrite for California. Voters there approved Proposition 187, which denies health care and public education to undocumented immigrants and their children. The initiative was condemned by the directorates of the United Church Board for World Ministries and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Division of Overseas Ministries as an "inhuman way of dealing with the immigration problem" and not apt to stem the tide of those likely to come or reduce those already here. The two mission agencies, which operate a joint Common Global Ministries Board, charge that 187 is directly opposed to their mandate "to commit ourselves in Christ to share life, resources and needs," to "share in God's healing of God's continuing creation; and to commit ourselves to engage in dialogue with people of other faiths and movements with whom we share a vision of peace, justice and the integrity of creation."

Some have suggested that General Synod 20 should not meet in Oakland, Calif., next summer, but contracts for convention space and hotels have already been signed. Court challenges could find Proposition 187 unconstitutional.

**JESUS AND SCHOOL PRAYERS** – Two UCC leaders are warning that voluntary prayer in public schools is a threat to religious freedom. "Truly voluntary prayer – offered out of real spiritual need – is the most intimate and the deepest expression of humanity's relationship with its God," Thomas Dipko of the UC Board for Homeland Ministries and Valerie Russell of the Office for Church in Society wrote in a letter to Congress and President Clinton. Clinton said he could not rule out support of a constitutional amendment to allow voluntary school prayers. Under the First Amendment, they insist, no government may tell Americans how or when or what to pray. Prayer arising out of other concerns, they contend (the two church leaders call the proposal a conservative version of political correctness), "is already something less than prayer, degenerating far too easily into a matter of form and show, the kind of boastful public activity which Jesus himself warned against."

**MAY I QUOTE YOU?** – "So the shepherds took their guitars and their skate boards and said to the angel, 'Can we come to the party for baby Jesus?'"

– The Christmas story as interpreted by a 9-year-old boy



**A PRAYER FOR CHRISTMAS EVE –**

Holy God, on this Christmas Eve help us to rid our minds of gifts we expect to receive or failed to give someone, of all the glitter of the season: instead, prepare us for the Savior to be born anew in our hearts and lives. Help us to use the wastebasket to discard all our anger and hurtful thoughts, our envy and jealousy, so that there is plenty of room for your loving Spirit to dwell there. In the quiet of this evening, may we hear the angel's song, may we see your Star guiding our souls to you, and as we gaze at the babe in the manger, may we say, "Come into my heart, Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for thee."

– From "A Book of Prayers for God's People in Need," by Fern Ahring, 75, a member of Evangelical UCC, Highland, Ill., for 61 years

**NOT SUPPOSED TO BE A WINNER –**

Conventional political wisdom said that because of his race, UCC minister H. Carl McColl could never be elected. But the candidate for state controller fooled the political pundits and became the first African American to win a state-wide election in New York. That he was the only Democrat to do so in New York this year made victory all the sweeter.

**GOOD NEWS! BAD NEWS! –**

I've got some good news and some bad news, the minister announced to his flock. The bad news is that our roof has sprung a leak and it's going to take big bucks to fix it. The good news is that we have the money. The bad news is that it's in your pockets.

*Keeping You Posted* is edited by William C. Winslow and produced monthly by the UCC Office of Communication, 700 Prospect Ave., Cleveland, OH 44115-1100.

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**NO "SHALT NOTS" –** On the theory that being positive is better than being negative, Paul Maxey, pastor of St John's UCC, Woodsboro, Md., has revised the Ten Commandments to get rid of "Thou shalt not . . .":

- Have respect for God's place.
- Have respect for God's person.
- Have respect for God's name.
- Have respect for God's day.
- Have respect for God's representatives.
- Have respect for another's life.
- Have respect for another's property.
- Have respect for another's spouse.
- Have respect for another's character.
- Have respect for another's stewardship.

**GIVING TO THOSE WHO NEVER ASK –** The joy of giving at Christmas is knowing that you have made someone happy with your thoughtfulness. No one is more appreciative of small gifts given than those who benefit from the Christmas Fund administered by the UCC Pension Boards. The Christmas Fund assists retired pastors who may feel a particular financial pinch during the holidays. Last Christmas, \$250 checks were distributed to 814 people who were recommended by conference ministers and the Pension Boards. One beneficiary was George Clapp, pastor emeritus of Faith United Community UCC, Prescott Valley, Ariz. "I don't know what we would have done without your assistance as health costs are so very expensive," he writes.

The Christmas Fund is something extra for the holidays. Your gift is a silent gift, but oh so appreciated. The address is the Pension Boards, 475 Riverside Dr., New York, NY 10115.

– UCN, 12/94

**VIRGIN BIRTH ACCOUNT CONVEYS CRITICAL TRUTH –**

The headlines screamed: "Mary did not Conceive Jesus Without the Assistance of a Human Male." That's the opinion of a group of leading biblical scholars called the "Jesus Seminar." Reaction from fundamentalists was swift. The Bible's report of the virginal birth of Jesus "is reliable history," countered a scholar at a Southern Baptist seminary. But both sides are missing "the heart of the matter," maintains UCC theologian Gabriel Fackre.

The story that Jesus was born from the Virgin Mary is "the story that God came into the human sphere to reconcile sinners," he says. Are the Bible stories then fact or myth? Fackre says the question assumes that Scripture should be read as a textbook of biology, chemistry or physics. "The Jesus Seminar believes the faith hinges on the 'hows' and 'wheres,' but the Bible is really about 'why,'" Fackre maintains. The fundamentalists make the same mistake, he adds. They read the Bible "as if it were a scientific textbook that stands or falls on the astronomy of Genesis or the biology of Mary." The truth, says Fackre, depends "on the power of the Holy spirit to communicate through biblical story the good news of the Word made flesh."

*Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!*